



# Save America's Treasures

PRESERVING THE NATION'S HERITAGE ONE GRANT AT A TIME BY MEGHAN HOGAN



When Francis Scott Key spent the rainy night of September 13, 1814, watching the British bombardment of Fort McHenry—a pivotal battle in the War of 1812—he had only one question in his mind. Which flag would fly in the morning? The Union Jack or the Stars and Stripes? We all know the answer—he joyfully proceeded to write the Star-Spangled Banner, which became our national anthem. That same flag, hand-stitched by Mary Pickersgill in 1813, will soon be seen once again in a new display at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. But in 1998, the flag wasn't telling a story of patriotism, it was telling a story of age. It had lost eight feet of fabric, and despite careful treatment by Smithsonian curators, dirt and light were slowly destroying the weakened wool and cotton. Its own weight was a stress as it hung in the museum. In short, it was falling apart. So began a national campaign called Save America's Treasures, with the flag one of the first and most recognized projects.

**Left:** The first known photo of the flag that flew over Fort McHenry during the War of 1812—inspiring Francis Scott Key's "Star-Spangled Banner"—taken in 1873 at the Boston Navy Yard. Conserved with help from a Save America's Treasures grant, it will be unveiled this November in a room designed to "evoke Dawn's early light." **Above left to right:** Philadelphia's historic Eastern State Penitentiary, the restored Majestic Showboat in Cincinnati, and Little Rock Central High School, the focus of the desegregation crisis in 1957, all grant recipients.

LEFT COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY, ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT JACK BOUCHER/NPS/HABS, WALLY GOBETZ, LITTLE ROCK CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

Perhaps one of the most important preservation programs ever, Save America's Treasures was created when First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton established the White House Millennium Council to celebrate the start of a new century. The council focused on the theme "Honor the Past—Imagine the Future," and what better way to do that than preserve the nation's treasures? The idea quickly became the centerpiece, stretching from a two-year program into ten. Today, it is strong as ever with First Lady Laura Bush a staunch champion as honorary chair.

Since 1998, a multi-agency team—including the National Park Service, the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the



Humanities, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services—has selected the sites and artifacts to receive grant awards. The National Trust for Historic Preservation, the program's private sector partner, handles fundraising and promotion. Over a thousand projects, totaling more than \$278 million, have been funded, giving their history a second chance at survival. The flag's unveiling this November will in many ways be a highlight of the accomplishments.

The program doesn't just help monuments and museums—it's one of the few initiatives that encompasses other expressions of cultural identity such as historic documents, collections, artifacts, and artistic works. According to a 2005 Institute of Museum and Library Services study, more than 4.8 billion objects—in historical societies, libraries, museums, scientific research collections, and archeological repositories—are crying out for help. Take the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Archives. Ailey worked for some of the world's top dance companies, like the Joffrey Ballet, before starting his own troupe in 1958. He created 79 ballets fusing jazz, modernism, and the heritage of African Americans. Today, the story of his company's birth resides in 8,500 photographs and more than 23,000 yellowed scrapbook pages of costume designs. Until 2006,

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the collections had grown brittle with age in one of the theater's storage closets. "In some instances, items were almost beyond salvage," says Christopher Zunner, the theater's director of public relations. But with the help of a \$132,000 award, all went to the Library of Congress for conservation and digitizing. "Most dance companies just don't have the money to process or store thousands of pages," says Elizabeth Aldrich, the library's curator of dance. Similar recipients include the Merce Cunningham Dance Archives in New York and the Conservation of Dance Archives in Washington, DC. The Ansel Adams Collection—over 2,500 prints, 40,000 negatives, and much of the photographer's equipment and correspondence, housed at the University of Arizona's Center for Creative Photography—received \$270,000 towards conserving images and constructing a storage facility.

"Save America's Treasures is really a showcase and repair shop for a very broad brush of our history," says Bobbie Greene McCarthy, the

Trust's Save America's Treasures project director. It supports not just collections, but the places that host them. One such place is Biloxi, Mississippi's Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art. George Edgar Ohr, the self-named "Mad Potter of Biloxi," created ebulliently shaped vases alive with ruffles, odd openings, and unusual glazes, "no two alike," he said. Ohr, who crafted over 10,000 pieces from the late 1870s to the early 1900s—many, unfortunately, destroyed by a shop fire—was way ahead of his day, frustrated by a failure to find appreciation. He once buried a stash in the hopes of reaching a future audience, and today his work is highly prized, with the museum holding the largest public collection of what remains. A \$425,000 grant went towards stabilizing the ceramics and constructing a vault in the museum's new Frank Gehry-designed home, being rebuilt after its destruction by Hurricane Katrina. The Cranbrook House in Bloomfield Hills,

**Left: From the collection of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, conserved at the Library of Congress thanks to Save America's Treasures. Right: George Ohr, the "Mad Potter of Biloxi," was frustrated that his exuberant offerings, like this one, often met with befuddlement; today, some see him as a harbinger of abstract expressionism. A grant helped stabilize a rare public collection at the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art, which is being rebuilt after its destruction by Hurricane Katrina.**



ABOVE COLLECTION OF THE OHR-O'KEEFE MUSEUM OF ART/GIFT OF DAVID WHITNEY IN HONOR OF FRANK AND BERTA GEHRY, LEFT ALVIN AILEY DANCE FOUNDATION, INC.



Michigan, and the Penland School of Crafts in Penland, North Carolina, are like institutions that have received funding.

Maybe even more endangered are the nation's houses of worship. Entirely dependent on congregant giving, changing demographics can kill a house of worship. Maintenance costs sometimes far exceed a congregation's budget. What's more, a house of worship is often a community backbone. That is the story behind the gray, stone-vaulted Gothic Revival structure standing at 1801 West Diamond Street in North Philadelphia. The Church of the Advocate, built between 1887 and 1897, had a founding goal of "free for all time," serving as a beacon of democracy when practices such as pew rent, or charging for the use of a pew, were common. More recent congregations added a procession of murals depicting the steps of the civil rights movement, a combination of art and architecture that is "much more conducive to worship than either one alone would have been," says sculptor and art historian Peter Rockwell. A \$500,000 grant is addressing some of church's \$2.5 million restoration needs. Dozens of other houses of worship have been grant recipients. A \$550,000 award for the First Church of Christ, Scientist in Berkeley, California meant new roofs and earthquake proofing for the Bernard Maybeck masterwork. Eldridge Street Synagogue in New York City, the nation's first to be built by Eastern European Jews, was awarded \$300,000 towards the restoration of its imposing façade.

What sites get chosen for the awards? Unfortunately, the nation isn't lacking when it comes to endangered sites and artifacts and program administrators aren't lacking in applications to choose from. Hundreds are sent in each year. But with only enough money from the NPS-administered Historic Preservation Fund to award a handful, the program has to prioritize. First in line are the neediest—those in dire straits. Recipients also have to be designated as either a national historic landmark or listed in the in the National Register of Historic Places as a site whose history had an impact on the entire country. A glance at Save America's Treasures projects shows every type imaginable. Some, such as Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater in Pennsylvania or the Angel Island Immigration Station in California, are well-known tourist attractions, others such as the Monitor Barns in Vermont or the CCC/WWW Collection in New Mexico, not as much. "I look at them like a jigsaw puzzle," says Kimber Craine, director of program initiatives for the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. "You might

look at one of them and wonder how it fits into our national story, but without that one piece there would be a big hole in the understanding of our history and culture."

The names of noted architects fill the pages of the applications. Though the program does not emphasize architecture, sometimes a building's style is a story unto itself. The house built by Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius in Lincoln, Massachusetts, was intended to fit into its surroundings, created with traditional New England fieldstone and wood, but with modernist features such as spiral staircases and glass block. It had an air of simplicity most visitors had not seen before. "Don't you find it terribly exhausting to always live so

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**Above: Bernard Maybeck's 1910 masterpiece, the First Church of Christ, Scientist in Berkeley, California. Left: Philadelphia's Church of the Advocate, shown here with a net to catch the crumbling ceiling, was a haven for the civil rights and women's rights movements, hosting the National Conference of Black Power in 1968 and becoming the first Episcopalian church to ordain women in 1974. Both structures, like many grant recipients, are national historic landmarks.**

LEFT JOSEPH ELLIOTT/NPS/HABS, ABOVE ONLINE ARCHIVE OF CALIFORNIA

**Right:** One of the finest examples of Georgian architecture in the country, Drayton Hall, a 1738 plantation house in South Carolina. **Below:** The Walter Gropius house, built by the Bauhaus founder in 1937 after he came to teach at Harvard, was part of the first wave of modernism to crash into America. **Bottom:** Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House, near Plano, Illinois. Built in 1951, the modernist sensation remains influential. Both Drayton Hall and the Farnsworth House are owned by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

far ahead of your time?" one of them asked his wife. What surrounded the house was as important as the structure—mature trees planted before construction. When they outgrew his vision, Gropius replaced them. A \$64,349 grant went towards landscaping the Japanese garden, apple orchard, and meadow so that tourists can see what he saw. Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois, also received a grant. The recently designated national historic landmark was a startling break from the traditional. Van der Rohe embraced the wooded landscape along the river—the translucent glass erasing conventional boundaries between indoors and out—affecting an extraordinary “light” appearance by suspending the structure on steel piers. Rather than being imposed on the landscape, it seems suspended above it. The grant went toward exterior repairs and flood abatement.



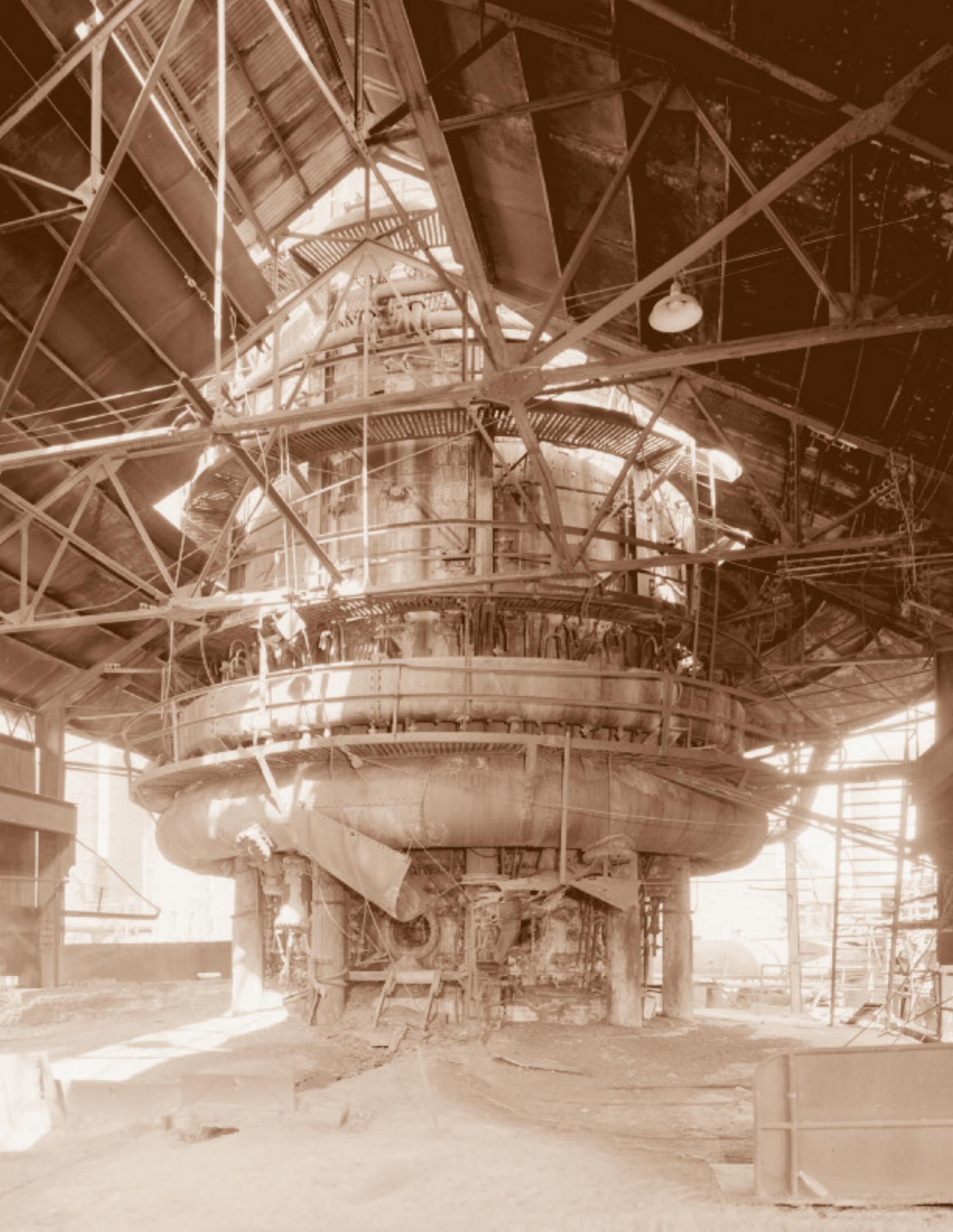
All the Save America's Treasures projects tell a story, but Drayton Hall in Charleston, South Carolina, tells several. Since 1738, the Georgian-Palladian structure has been a rice plantation, a military command center, a strip mining site, and a vacation retreat. Yet its beauty is still alive in every room, from the lotus and squash blossom brackets in the stair hall to the frieze in the Great Hall, which also holds the house's rarest treasure—a decorative plaster ceiling hand-formed in the 18th century. By 1999, though, when the house

received its \$250,000 grant, the ceiling was in grave shape. Visitors could only get a limited view of the second floor—just one room and only while standing on a narrow Kevlar bridge. The fear was that people trudging across wood beams above the plaster ceiling might cause it to collapse. Engineers mapped the cracks with GIS technology, then injected a consolidant. The windows were repaired and the paint preserved, too. It was the most extensive, and dramatic, conservation since the house was purchased by the National Trust in 1974. “It is much more open to visitors now that they can tour the second floor,” says Jessica Garrett, the site's director of development.





ABOVE LOUIS SCHWARTZ/NPS/HABS, TOP LEFT JACK BOUCHER/NPS/HABS, BOTTOM LEFT LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COUNCIL OF ILLINOIS

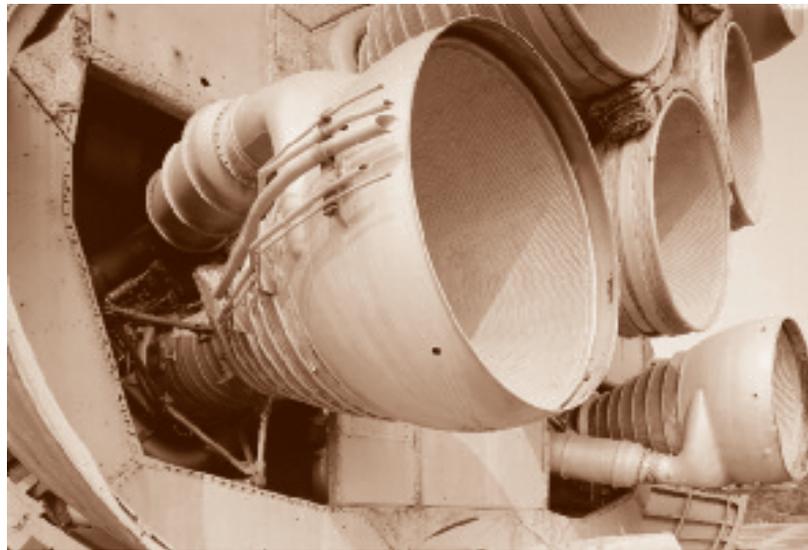


In a time when factories are closing left and right, some projects recall our technological legacy. Sloss Furnaces, in an industrial compound near downtown Birmingham, Alabama, helped earn the place the nickname “Magic City.” The location showcased the spectacle of iron making to much of Birmingham: passing motorists, city residents, and the workers who lived nearby. According to one National Park Service historian, earlier generations even found the machines a source of entertainment, perfect for “Sunday afternoon ‘furnace party’ picnics.” As site curator Karen Utz points out, it is one of only a few industrial sites preserved as a national historic landmark. “We largely tear them down and use them for scrap,” she says of America’s tendency to destroy old machinery. “Some don’t consider these sites to be pretty. But I think they are.”

The operation shut down in the early 1970s. Since then, rain and humidity have taken their toll on the rusted magnificence of the region’s oldest remaining blast furnaces. With the help of a Save America’s Treasures grant for \$207,000, the national historic landmark was able to repair the foundation of Number One Furnace, replace its deteriorated beams, and apply a protective coating to shield the metal exterior against further damage. Similar projects include Cambria Ironworks in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and Tannehill/Brierfield Ironworks in McCalla, Alabama.

A grant for the 363-foot-tall Saturn V Rocket, one of the three that enthralled our space-obsessed nation in the 1960s, is a sign that many modern artifacts need help too. Some of the strongest engines ever known—producing up to nine million pounds of thrust—couldn’t do anything about the weather. After decades of deteriorating under the hot Alabama sun, the rocket was moved inside for restoration, thanks to a \$700,000 grant. The funds also went towards a \$21.2 million exhibit hall for displaying the behemoth, at the new Davidson Center for

**Left: Sloss Furnaces, once a motor of the industrial South’s economy, produced pig iron for nearly 100 years. Below: Engines of the Saturn V rocket, which carried the first mission to the moon and effectively ended the space race. Both were grant recipients.**



Space Exploration in Huntsville, Alabama. The glass-walled side of the structure, facing Interstate 565, gives even passing motorists a view.

The magic of the grant program isn’t just the award itself, but what it inspires. The maximum an awardee can receive is only \$700,000, a cap instituted in 2006. But for every dollar a project is granted, the recipient has to match it one to one—a mandate that often incites a flurry of fundraising and heightened public awareness. It also brings something that public sites usually have a very hard time getting: corporate interest. Many companies, because they can’t have their name on a building or put a sign out front, are not interested in donating to government-owned properties. So Save America’s Treasures supplies that public exposure. Multimillion corporations such as the Polo Ralph Lauren Foundation and Alcoa, Inc. have donated to the program. HGTV, in a partnership “Restore America” campaign with the National Trust, gave \$2 million to 24 sites. But, as Craine points out, the program couldn’t work without the support it’s received from everyday Americans and businesses. “There are more examples like the citizen crusade to save the Tenth Street Bridge in Great Falls, Montana, which involved hundreds of grassroots donations and the efforts of thousands of volunteers,” he says.

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Among the oldest sites to receive grants, the jewels of the Southwest are a testament to time. The prehistoric cliff dwellings in Colorado's Mesa Verde National Park are a maze of rooms, kivas, and balconies carved out of the sandstone cliffs by Pueblo Indians in the 13th century. Extensive conservation is needed to keep the weather-beaten treasures from crumbling. A \$1.5 million grant, one of the program's largest, served as the foundation for a \$10 million preservation project. A \$400,000 award went to Acoma Pueblo, the

longest continuously occupied Indian community in America, for restoring its circa 1640 San Esteban del Rey Mission, with its colorful Acoma paintings of parrots, corn, and rainbows. With its dark history of Spanish invasion, it is one of the community's most significant, yet deteriorating, structures. Another Spanish mission to make the list is the moisture-damaged Mission Concepción, one of several within San Antonio Missions National Historical Park in Texas.

BELOW WILLIAM CURRENT, NEAR RIGHT ARTHUR W. STEWART/NPS/HABS, FAR RIGHT BUDDY MAYS/CORBIS





**Far left:** Mission Concepción in San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, Texas. Built in 1760, this grant recipient is the oldest unreconstructed Spanish Colonial church in the United States. **Near left:** Indian girl at Acoma Pueblo, circa 1970, one of the oldest continuously inhabited towns in the country, also preserved with the help of a grant. **Below:** Colorado's Mesa Verde National Park, which received one of the largest awards.





LEFT JACK BOUCHER/NPS/HABS, NEAR RIGHT RONALD PARTRIDGE/NPS/HABS, FAR RIGHT ROBERT LYON/NPS/HABS

Everyday buildings make our landscapes what they are, too. The dusty desert ghost towns of the Bodie Historic Mining District in Bridgeport, California, and Virginia City, Montana—some of the last vestiges of the Old West—are where gold diggers once rushed to find their fortune. Not many found that pot of gold, but they had a good time trying. “There was nothing visible to remind a person in the slightest degree that it was Sunday. Every store, saloon, and dancing hall was in full blast,” wrote one resident shortly after arriving in Virginia City. Most mining towns struggled to survive, but Virginia City was an exception, its citizens investing \$35,000 in a new courthouse. Today, with a population of 150, the town is still alive, and so is the two-story structure, the oldest in Montana still used as a house of law. But by 2004 it had old clothing stuffed in the windows to keep the elements out. A grant went towards resealing the exterior, restoring woodwork, and updating wiring.

One of the most influential buildings in America’s vernacular past is Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, a relic of the nation’s earliest prison design. Architect John Haviland created a radial floorplan with a circular center, arms protruding from it as cell-blocks. The Rotunda, as it was known, was a key feature, serving as the surveillance hub. Over 300 prisons copied the design. Abandoned from 1971 to 1994, the building now stands largely in ruins, a state that suits the experience of the property, says its owner, a nonprofit that turned it into a museum. But stabilizing the Rotunda and the cell-block links was a necessity to fend off further water damage. “Entire sections of plaster were coming down,” says Sean Kelley, the nonprofit’s program director. “We’re talking hardhats.” A

\$500,000 grant was used to replace and repair damaged roofing, keeping the area, integral to interpretation, open. “It’s impossible to bring in visitors without going through the hub,” Kelley says. Major projects like this one give the public a closer look at what goes into saving our treasures. Craine recalls the conservation of Thomas Sully’s “The Passage of the Delaware,” an immense 19th-century painting at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. “It became both a public event and a teaching tool,” Craine says. That is arguably the biggest success any project can have—that the public will get it.

With 10 years of preservation success, thanks to Save America’s Treasures, what will the next 10 bring? Many preservationists hope to see the program set in stone. Intended initially for the millennial celebration, Save America’s Treasures has continued entirely on the good-

**WITH 10 YEARS OF PRESERVATION SUCCESS, THANKS TO SAVE AMERICA’S TREASURES, WHAT WILL THE NEXT 10 BRING? MANY PRESERVATIONISTS HOPE TO SEE THE PROGRAM SET IN STONE.**

will of Congress, along with full support from the current administration. Waiting in the wings is the Preserve America and Save America’s Treasures Act, introduced last year and currently slated for a vote by the Senate. The legislation would finally give the program formal authoriza-



**Left: Philadelphia’s Eastern State Penitentiary. Above left: Bodie Historic Mining District. Above right: Virginia City, Montana.**

tion, at least until 2013. The future also depends on the interests of the next administration. The challenge, according to McCarthy, is catching an administration’s eye right off the bat. “We want Save America’s Treasures on the dance card before it fills up,” she says, adding that it’s a program most people are eager to get behind. “It’s helped pump millions into an area that was starving.”

For general information about Save America’s Treasures, contact Kimber Craine at the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities at (202) 682-5661. For a program overview and a list of awarded projects, please visit the National Park Service Save America’s Treasures site at [www.nps.gov/history/hps/treasures/](http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/treasures/).